Charlestown Ch 33

"The mighty dead
"Who blessed mankind and humanised the world."

THE CHRISTIAN FREEMAN
AND
Record of Unitarian Worthies

BEING A HISTORY OF THE UNITARIAN REFORMATION OF RELIGION IN EUROPE AND AMERICA DURING THE LAST THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS.

With some Account of the most Notable Works written by Unitarians.

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SOMETHING ABOUT ICELAND.

By an Icelander.

About my country, Mr. Editor, I am modest enough to believe that not many of the readers of The Christian Freeman know much, if anything, excepting that it is an island near Greenland with a fiery mountain and hot springs, and which for many hundreds of years has been owned by the Danish Government. Indeed, the Danes themselves—like the world in general, we have been led to suppose—know about this much and little more. We have travelled little, and few tourists indeed have thought of our country as a place they cared to see; and so it is that we are an obscure people up in a corner of the extreme North, put quietly out of the way. But as all the world is on the move, we, too, are beginning to look about, and there are now no less than seven Icelanders in the United Kingdom, two ladies and five gentlemen—for we know the movements of one another, and feel a tender interest in all who leave our isle. My friend Mrs. ——, who is now in this country, is the first lady for several hundred years who has visited England, although we are a tolerably ancient people—1874 being the millennium, or the thousandth year of our history as a civilised people. "A civilised people!" says one of your little readers; "are they not a pigmy race of Esquimaux, dressed in skins, feeding on blubber, and living in huts or hunting seals on ice all the year round?" Pardon me, my little dear, you have fallen into the same mistake that many have fallen into, for I may be allowed to say that, physically, we are as fine a race of people as any nation of Europe, with as fair a skin and as well clothed and housed in general as other civilised nations are. And here I may add that we have been well governed, too, with a few exceptional periods, for a thousand years. I know the people of Iceland well—no one knows them better; and as I am in England at the beginning of a new educational era of your country, the friends of education will be glad to know from me that nineteen of every twenty of our adult population can read, and four of every five can write and sum. We have few schools, it is true—some four or five for a population of 70,000 people, but every home is a school, and every parent is a teacher, and the long, long nights—at present twenty hours long—are wiled away with much reading, story-telling, in some places a little music, the guitar, and in every home many nice games. We may have some dozen pianos in all upon our island; these are in our seaport towns, for as the population is so sparse over our island—as large as Ireland is—70,000 people could never make roads in such a country as ours, and so no pianos are inland. We are without carts or carriages of any kind. The travelling is performed on horseback, for no one could foot it across our fords and rivers; we have no bridges. Even our harvesting, which is principally hay, is brought home on the backs of horses. I hold it is not simply the ingenuity and the skill and industry of your people that make you rich. It is the immense population of your country that enables your capitalists to employ the skilful, and able to show that there will be an equitable return for the labour and capital that have fabricated your fine bridges and splendid roads. With us all this is utterly impossible. Nor are we much of an increasing people. Of late we have increased. The island at one time had on it one hundred thousand people. There are sad pages in our history. Shut off as we have been from all the world, there came

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at times bad seasons for the farmer that left him without food for his sheep; and the trader no money to purchase foreign grain—for all our corn is brought to us; then a long severe winter, and thousands of our small population have frequently perished with cold and hunger. Ah, yes! it is a sad tale, the history of Iceland's privations and sufferings from famine, famine, famine, and from causes quite beyond the control of the most provident. Widespread plains and immense tracts of country at times have been made desolate by volcanic irruptions. Hecla may be the only burning mountain known to your readers. There is many a Hecla in Iceland, and the scenes at times are fearful. I have witnessed one irruption from the distance of two hundred miles that lighted up the whole island for weeks; and thus it has been that strange and disturbing atmospheric causes have brought diseases among the people and diseases among the sheep and cattle; and famine and pestilence have been twin sisters of trouble to my people—a people shut up in a northern island, from which they could not fly, and whose wail of grief and want could not be known by distant nations. In addition to this, while the average death-rate of your island is about twenty to the thousand every year, with us it is about forty, or as serious a mortality at all times as in years of plague or cholera with you. Some may say, why not fly from such a land? Ah, no! "My country, I love thee still!" and perils and sorrows, often so far from lessening our attachment, only deepen and make more sacred the feelings of place and time. We do not think of running away from danger and death. The old Scandinavian blood that runs through the veins of the Britisher flows as freely through our hearts. We are of the same stock of Norsemen. Our fathers of yore never flinched from the fight—as you well know—because of danger or death, and we hold on and will hold on to our land, for God has ordained, we hope, yet better times. This year the Danes have granted us "Home Rule," but indeed we need scarcely any rule at all. Liberty is all our need, for our people are a loyal and law abiding people. A soldier has never been seen in our country for centuries, and we hope never will. The teacher and the religious minister are the best guardians of the people's safety and the world's peace. True we have crime; we have some drunkenness, some theft, some violence at times, and, on an average, a murder every ten years in our island. Our law officers would rather amuse than impress with awe an European. In many places one man holds a plurality of livings, with not much emolument for all put together. He may be policeman, and magistrate, and gaoler too, to inflict such stripes or punishment as precedent justifies. A plain people, given to fishing and farming, with little among them to encourage either luxury or indolence, who have to fight the good fight of industry to keep famine from the door; it may be no great virtue, it is true, to say of them, there is little time or disposition for crime among them; for I am persuaded a slothful life is the one great cause connected with ignorance that has led to so much crime in other lands. We are also a religious people, having in all about 300 places of worship, with a fairly educated clergy. About 300 years age we turned from Roman Catholic to Lutheran somewhat suddenly. Since that time we have been Lutheran and remain so. Think of this—a country without opposing sects—one religion only. The Catholics established a mission to re-convert us about twelve years ago, and have not yet made one proselyte. The priest is there still, and the chapel; he alone the preacher and the audience. Like other countries, more liberal theological thoughts and feelings about God and destiny begin to show themselves, like some spring flowers that augur a coming summer. I have read, through the mercy of God, your good Dr. Channing's works, and his religious sentiments are mine, and may God help me to make them known to my people whom I love, and would like to make still more virtuous and happy. This will be a work of time. I shall try to sow the seed for the coming harvest. The difficulties of the religious reformer are necessarily great. We have no periodical literature, but three very small newspapers, which are not issued with much regularity. I devoutly wish we had a religious paper such as I see among you, and must do something now to institute one. Our people from the want of roads do not come often to our small towns. Reykjavik (pronounced Rick-a-vick) is the capital. The people come to market and make their purchases but once a year. Only of late have we had a regular mail or post-office at all, and now letters, &c., are transmitted once a month. We have nine mails a year to, and nine from foreign lands. To distant parts of our own country

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SOMETHING ABOUT ICELAND.

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letters go first to Copenhagen, then run the chance of being shipped to some port on the other side of our island. What a contrast from your London, with its nine deliveries of letters in a day; and at best we have but nine in the year. No correspondence have we with the outer world at all in December, January, and February. Our fiery mountains and hot springs are not the only curiosities therefore of our country. 'Tis beautiful to behold from the top of the northern mountains the sun all night long, and at midnight like a golden swan swimming on the surface of the stormy or the placid sea. Much of the scenery is magnificent, much of it, too, is tame. No fine forests such as you have. How one of your noble trees would excite the admiration of our people, who have never seen anything higher than a shrub on our island. We have nevertheless much in common. Our poetry and songs are similar, our pleasures and sorrows much alike. Our reverence for God and love for Christ, and our sense of justice and our hope of immortal life the same. Many of our people, to mingle with their fellows in worship —so distant are they from the churches —leave home on the Saturday morning, some on Friday, and do not reach home again till the Monday night. This travel you know nothing of, but it is compensated for by the joy of congregated worship. I have more to say, but for the present must leave off by wishing all your readers

> "Agætust audnan ther
> Ypplypti bithjum ver
> Methan ath uppi er
> Oell heimsins thjóth!"

Curious enough, the words above are a part of our national air, sung by us to the same tune as your "God save the Queen," and mean, "May you have the best happiness which may lift you up from one degree of goodness to another as long as our race endures."

A SWEET SONG OF SORROW.

BY JOHN G. WHITTIER.

My thoughts are all in yonder town,
Where, wept by many tears,
To-day my mother's friend lays down,
The burden of her years.

True as in life, no poor disguise
Of death with her is seen,
And on her simple casket lies
No wreath of bloom and green.

Yet all about, the softening air
Of new born sweetness tells,
And the ungathered May flowers wear
The tints of ocean shells.

The old, assuring miracle
Is fresh as heretofore;
And earth takes up its parable
Of life from death once more.

Here organ swell and church bell toll
Methinks but discord were,
The prayerful silence of the soul
Is best befitting her.

Sing softly, spring-bird, for her sake,
And thou not distant sea,
Lapse lightly as if Jesus spake,
And thou wert Galilee!

For all her quiet life flowed on
As meadow streamlets flow,
Where fresher green reveals alone
The noiseless way they go.

From her loved place of prayer I see
The plain robed mourners pass,
With slow feet treading reverently
The graveyard's springing grass.

Make room, O mourning ones, for me,
Where, like the friends of Paul,
That you no more her face shall see,
You sorrow most of all.

Her path shall brighten more and more
Unto the perfect day;
She cannot fail of peace who bore
Such peace with her away.

O sweet, calm face that seemed to wear
The look of sins forgiven!
O voice of prayer that seemed to bear
Our own needs up to heaven!

How reverent in our midst she stood,
Or knelt in grateful praise!
What grace of Christian womanhood
Was in her household ways!

For still her holy living meant
No duty left undone;
The heavenly and the human blent
Their kindred loves in one.

And if her life small leisure found
For feasting ear and eye,
And pleasure, on her daily round,
She passed unpausing by.

Yet with her went a secret sense
Of all things sweet and fair,
And beauty's gracious providence
Refreshed her unaware.

She kept her line of rectitude
With love's unconscious ease;
Her kindly instincts understood
All gentle courtesies.

An inborn charm of graciousness
Made sweet her smile and tone,
And glorified her farm-wife dress
With beauty not its own.

The dear Lord's best interpreters
Are humble human souls;
The Gospel of a life like hers
Is more than books or scrolls.

From scheme and creed the light goes out,
The saintly fact survives;
The blessed Master none can doubt
Revealed in holy lives.

WAYSIDE GATHERINGS.

—o—

FAITH.—A little girl was once asked the following question: "What is faith?" She replied, "Doing God's will and asking no questions."

GETTING ON.—Two little girls were comparing progress in catechism study. "I've got to Original Sin," said one. "How far have you got?"—"Me? Oh! I'm away beyond Redemption," said the other.

A QUESTION ABOUT HELL.— An orthodox paper, the *Independent*, asks this startling question: "Is Hell the Basis of the Kingdom of Heaven?" How is the celestial superstructure to stand if it rests only on a bottomless pit?

THE BEETHOVENS.—The brother of Beethoven signed his name, to distinguish himself from his landless relative, "Von Beethoven, land-owner." The other signed his name "Beethoven, brain-owner," to be equal with him.

UNITARIAN CHURCHES.—There are now thirty-one Unitarian churches in the city of Boston, America, a fashionable place for Unitarians and a very safe profession there. We know some Church-going Unitarians here who wish Boston was a little nearer.

VERY TRUE.—In a lecture at Scarborough reported in the *Scarborough Gazette* of Sept. 25th, 1873, "Father Ignatius, O.S.B.," says: "The passages of Scripture in favour of the monastic system are actually plainer than those which teach the Divinity of our Lord."

THE VALUE OF A NEWSPAPER.—The following advertisement appeared recently in a London daily:—"The *Times*.—A country priest will say mass once a week for the benefit of any one who will regularly send him the *Times* newspaper, second-hand on the day of publication."

GOOD ADVICE.—President Nott, in his wise old age, once took a newly-married couple aside, and said: "I want to give you this advice, my children. *Don't try to be happy.* Happiness is a shy nymph, and if you chase her you will never catch her. But just go quietly on and do your duty, and she will come to you."

LORD HOUGHTON ON UNITARIAN WORTHIES.—In his inaugural address at the Norwich Social Science Congress, 1873, his lordship said: "Sir John Bowring's special characteristic was an eager philanthropy, and a desire to promote in every form the material and mental prosperity of mankind." And again, "I know no provincial city other than Norwich adorned with so many names illustrious in literature, the professions and public life. Those of Taylor, Martineau, Austin, Alderson, Opie, come first to my recollection."

ADVANCED THINKERS.—We ought all to aim at advancing in knowledge, by throwing off ignorance and prejudice. But it is quite possible to fancy ourselves advanced in knowledge when we are only advanced in conceit. This is shown in the story of an *advanced* Jew, a young man who wanted to be a philosopher, and probably thought himself one already. But his mother believed that it would be possible for him to be yet wiser; and she therefore brought him to the celebrated Moses Mendelsohn for instruction in philosophy. Mendelsohn undertook the task, and began by inquiring as to the young man's progress. His mother answered that he had begun to eat pork, and had left off saying his prayers, and she asked what further steps he should take. But Mendelsohn dismissed him saying, "He is already *advanced* beyond me; I can teach him nothing."

NOBLE CONDUCT.—Professor Agassiz remarked to a friend lately that he had made it the rule of his life to abandon any kind of work the moment its results had become commercially valuable, because then there were thousands of hands ready to take it up.

PAYING FOR PLEASURE.—Josh Billings says: "Most men concede that it looks foolish to see a boy dragging a heavy sled up hill for the 'fleetin' pleasure of riding down again. But it appears to me that boy is a sage by the side of a young man who works hard all the week, and drinks up his wages on Saturday night."

ADVANCE OF FOLLY.—The *Chronologische Anzeiger* of Reymer gives the following *aperçu* of the "development" of practices in the Church of Rome: The use of Holy Water was introduced in the year 120; Penance, in 157; Monks appeared in 348; the Latin Mass, in 391; Extreme Unction, in 550; Purgatory, in 593; the Invocation of Mary and the Saints, in 715; Kissing the Feet of the Pope, in 809; the Canonisation of Saints and the Beatification of the Blessed, in 993; Bells, in 1000; the Celibacy of Priests, in 1015; Indulgences, in 1119; Dispensations, in 1200; the Elevation of the Host, in 1200; the Inquisitions, in 1204; Oral Confession, in 1215; the Immaculate Conception, in 1860; Infallibility, in 1870.

MOTHERLY.—What a dear old Saxon epithet is the word "motherly." Motherly kindness, attention, nurture. The word is never unwelcome when fairly applied. Motherly influence; who has not felt it? Motherly love; who has not enjoyed it? Motherly self-denial; often the secret heading of the longest chapters of her life, memory of which long survives them all. Motherly self-sacrifice, true to the last, often re-appearing in some posthumous expression, like a voice from the tomb. My friend, the Rev. John Burbidge, of St. Stephen's, Sheffield, put it to the mothers and sons of his church: "Does not history tell us how St. Augustine, Theoderet, Basil and St. Chrysostom owed everything to a mother's prayers? Have we not read how Bishop Hall was dedicated to the service of Christ by his mother on her death-bed; how Payson traced all his hopes and usefulness to the Christian nurture of his home; how Brainerd ascribed his deep religious feelings to the education of his early years; how Philip Henry and his five sisters avowed that what piety they possessed they owed under God to their parents; how James Montgomery traced his love for spiritual things to the instruction received in childhood; how the mother of the Wesleys left impressions on the character of her illustrious sons which were never effaced; how Romaine, Dodridge, Felix Neff, Leigh Richmond, Richard Knill and Robert Moffat all tell of the melting and moulding influence of the Christian homes amid which they were reared?"—*Quiver.*

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